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ABSTRACT

Fantasy may be effective in reducing anxiety in many healthy children and in children living with the long-term stress of chronic illness. Chronically ill (N=26) and healthy (N=26) children, ages five through nine, were randomly assigned to either fantasy facilitation or attention control conditions. Treatment conditions were carried out in the home by the mother under supervision of the experimenter. Chronically ill children were significantly more anxious than the healthy children on all pretreatment anxiety measures. Results indicate that fantasy facilitation was effective in reducing anxiety for both chronically ill and healthy children; those in the attention control condition showed no change in anxiety level. For chronically ill children who are often limited in their personal coping mechanisms, fantasy is one skill which can effectively reduce anxiety. (Author/NRB)

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# Anxiety Reduction Through Fantasy in Chronically Ill and Normal Children

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Anxiety Reduction Through Fantasy in Chronically Ill and Normal Children

There is a fairly large literature on the effects on children of chronic diseases with their concommitants of pain, motoric limitations, social restrictions and stigmata, burdensome treatment regimens, and the threat of death or disability. The literature agrees that a pervasive and serious effect of these stresses is more or less debilitating anxiety. However, it does not generally analyze the complexities of the process of perceiving, assessing and reacting to stress. Such analysis may be found in such work as Lazarus' theory of stress and coping. This theory proposes two broad classes of coping behavior. The first, action tendencies, are aimed at affecting the external situation. The second, cognitive maneuvers, include but are not limited to classic defense mechanisms and refer to internal psychological maneuvers directed not toward changing the environment, but rather to reducing the negative affect associated with the threat. Chronically ill children, however, are often limited in the coping mechanisms they can select. There is little they can do to bring about any real change in the threatening situation. Therefore, it would seem that their repertoire of coping mechanisms is limited to the second category, cognitive maneuvers designed to reduce negative affect, especially anxiety.

Singer and his colleagues have elaborated a set of ideas about the importance of the related phenomena of fantasy, daydreaming, and make-believe play in the lives of children and adults, suggesting that these phenomena may serve as coping mechanisms which would fall into Lazarus' category of cognitive maneuvers. There is evidence that fantasy activities may enhance children's feelings of control over their environment, serve as a source of pleasure and gratification, improve their ability

to handle aggressive feelings in socially acceptable ways, improve the capacity to delay gratification, and compensate for motoric restrictions. Given these findings, fantasy would seem to be a potentially powerful aid to successful coping by chronically ill children.

The present research tested the hypothesis that a particular kind of fantasy activity may be effective in reducing anxiety in children operating under the long-term stress of chronic illness, and to a lesser extent, in healthy children.

Method

The subjects for the experiment were 26 children ages five through nine with a variety of chronic diseases, including cystic fibrosis, hemophilia, myelodysplasias, seizure disorders, endocrine disturbances, cardiac disease and chronic asthma, as well as 26 children drawn from a well-child clinic with a similar socio-economic make-up. All children were in the normal range of intelligence. They were assigned randomly to the fantasy-facilitation or the attention control condition after parents agreed to participate in a project concerning the effects of various kinds of parent-child activities on children's play preferences and feelings. There were thus four experimental groups of thirteen children each. The fantasy activity selected for this experiment was drawn from the work of DeMille, whose book Put Your Mother on the Ceiling offers an instrument specifically designed for developing fantasy capacity, in the form of games with a story-like structure. The attention control activities consisted of games of skill and chance. All activities were carried out by the mothers under the supervision of the experimenter.

The experimental procedure consisted of two home visits, with the fantasy-facilitation or attention-control activities intervening. Measures of anxiety (Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children and

Louisville Behavior Checklist Anxiety Scales) and measures of fantasy (Singer Play Interview and Transcendence Index) were administered at each visit. Demographic and cognitive data were also gathered during the first visit, and the mothers were instructed in the procedures appropriate to their condition. They were asked to interact with their children using these activities for at least eight fifteen-minute sessions, and to tape all sessions as a manipulation check. They were blind to the design and hypotheses of the study. The dependent measure that was selected prior to the experiment was the amount of change recorded on the Spielberger Trait Anxiety Scale from the first to the second visit.

Results

As expected, the chronically ill children were significantly more anxious than the healthy children on all three pretreatment measures of anxiety.

The study hypothesis was evaluated using a 2 (Health Status) by 2 (Treatment Condition) factor analysis of variance of anxiety change scores. The main effect for treatment was significant, $F = 6.08$, $df = 1/48$, $p < .02$. Thus the fantasy facilitation treatment condition was effective in reducing anxiety for both groups of children. The attention control condition resulted in no change in anxiety level.

Discussion

These results have both theoretical and practical implications. They support the hypothesis that anxiety levels in children can be successfully reduced by fantasy facilitation activities. They also confirm that chronically ill children in general exhibit measurably higher levels of

anxiety than healthy children, even when the children are assessed in their own homes as opposed to a hospital or clinic.

In clinical terms, although the difference between the anxiety reduction obtained in the chronically ill group as compared to that obtained in the healthy group was not statistically significant, it is clear from the data that the practical importance of the manipulation was marked for the ill group. It is encouraging that despite the factors operating to keep anxiety in these children at high levels, these levels can be affected by a manipulation that appears to be both flexible and easily utilized by both professionals and non-professionals.

These results also provide direct support for Singer's conception of fantasy as a skill that children can learn and can use as an effective coping mechanism, and indirect support for the utility of Lazarus' categorization of coping mechanisms as involving action or cognitive processes.

Finally, discussion of these findings will emphasize implications for practitioners of pediatric psychology. Given the restraits imposed by medical illnesses on the environmental manipulations available as therapeutic options to those working with sick children, empirical evidence for the utility of a purely verbal approach to anxiety reduction is most encouraging.

Table 1

Change in Trait Anxiety Scores in Chronically Ill and Healthy Children Receiving Fantasy Facilitation and Attention Control Activities

| | Fantasy Facilitation | | Attention Control | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| Chronically Ill | -6.92 | 8.83 | -0.15 | 9.96 |
| Healthy | -2.85 | 5.10 | 1.00 | 6.57 |